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BENITEZ URGES CLERGY TO OPPOSE KLAN

HOUSTON -- The Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas has called on his clergy to take a stand against the Ku Klux Klan's tactics of "harassment, intimidation and the threat of bodily harm directed against the Vietnamese fishermen in the Texas Gulf Coast."

A good portion of the Texas coastline, which has been described as a "hot war area" by observers, is within the confines of the 57-county Diocese of Texas. Increasingly there have been threats of violence by the Ku Klux Klan which has joined cause with the American fishermen who have had sharp differences with Vietnamese refugees currently fishing there.

The strife has a more than two-year history, dating its focal point back to April, 1979, when an American fisherman was killed in Seadrift, Tex. The influx of the Vietnamese into the Texas gulf has increased competition for what has been recognized as an already diminished natural resource and various difficulties have surfaced between the two groups. Most recently the Ku Klux Klan has held rallies in which crosses and a shrimp boat hull were burned.

Bishop Maurice M. Benitez said he was deeply concerned about the Klan's increasing activity in the area and specifically the increasing harassment against the Vietnamese.

The bishop called the Klan's tactics "an outrage that is contrary to the Christian religion as well as American ideals. A fundamental tenet of our Judeo-Christian heritage is brotherly love extended to the 'stranger in our midst,' " he said. "Furthermore, we can remind ourselves that unless our ancestors were native Americans, they arrived on these shores as immigrants or refugees in one form or another."

The bishop requested all clergy of the diocese to "do all in your power to mobilize public opinion in our diocese against the resurgence of the KKK and specifically against the public standing idly by while a small minority group is being subjected to intimidation and threats of bodily harm."

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He further asked that they "communicate with both public officials and law enforcement officers our insistence that these Vietnamese refugees as well as all others residing in this area enjoy full protection of their constitutional rights and certainly the freedom from the threat of bodily harm while engaging in their livelihood."

Benitez said it is "clearly Christ's mission for us to take a strong stand against injustice in our society and doubly so when directed against minority groups."

In addition to the pastoral letter to Texas clergy, the bishop was also one of seventeen adjudicatory and organizational heads to sign a statement expressing support for the Vietnamese fishermen and deploring the "slurs and violence-inciting activities of the Ku Klux Klan."

In addition to Roman Catholic, United Church of Christ, United Methodist, Presbyterian, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran and other heads of religious bodies, Benitez was joined in supporting the statement for the Episcopal Church by the Ven. Courtland M. Moore, archdeacon of the Diocese of Dallas. The message was presented to Houston press representatives at a conference at the Roman Catholic Chancery March 18.

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